



FAS Note: See also Senator Kerrey's [June 30, 2010 floor speech](#).

**Office of Senator J. Robert Kerrey
United States Senate
SH-141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-2704**

October 11, 2000

The Honorable William S. Cohen
Department of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Cohen:

I am writing to summarize the discussion we had in your office last week regarding the process of classifying the details of the United States nuclear weapons targeting plan. For some time I have been asking for details of the targeting plan but I have been told on every occasion that I am not entitled to know. I believe strongly that no member of Congress should be denied this information. Further, I believe the decision to limit access to the targeting plan does not make the United States more secure; it makes us less secure.

Having served three years in the United States Navy, four years as Governor of Nebraska responsible for the public safety mission of our National Guard, and twelve years in the United States Senate witnessing and working with the men and women who serve in our Armed Forces, I am an unshakable, unapologetic supporter of the U.S. military. We taxpayers get more than our money's worth of benefits: freedom and peace leading the list.

Having served for two years as a member of the United States Navy's SEAL Team and eight years on the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence -- including four years as Vice-Chairman -- I have a clear understanding of the value and need for keeping some things secret. Without keeping and protecting secrets, we simply could not perform the most important of government missions, keeping our people and our interests safe.

That said, two cautionary truths must be kept in mind when we agree to keep secrets. First, this is a democracy, a republican form of representational government in which the people must govern. Transparency in our decision-making and the ever-present knowledge that sunshine illuminates all of our decisions are the best checks against abuse of power. Second, sometimes secrecy does not equal increased security. Sometimes secrecy produces its opposite, less safety and security.

Why is this so? Because at times decision-makers are prevented from having the very piece of information they need in order to make the right decision. And because classification at its most basic level is a regulation that costs money and time and because there are

situations in which time is the essence that separates life from death, delays in decision-making can have tragic consequences.

Just such a situation exists with the system classifying the specific targeting decisions for our strategic nuclear weapons. Under existing rules a member of Congress can read the Presidential Directive that governs targeting, but they cannot see the targeting plan which is the only way of knowing if the instructions of the Presidential Directive are being followed. As an elected representative of the people every member of Congress has an absolute need to know these details.

I am also troubled by the constantly changing rationale that has been given to me as to why Congress is not entitled to know. At an unprecedented joint meeting of the Republican and Democratic Policy Committees held on June 15, 2000, and attended by over half of the United States Senate, I was given three different reasons. With each answer there was an obvious response that demonstrated that the answer could not be supported.

After Under Secretary of Defense, Mr. Walter Slocombe and CINC STRATCOM Admiral Richard Mies presented an overview of the targeting plan to the Senators, I asked why we were not given more than a general outline of the targeting decisions. The first answer was that they had not brought the detailed data. My response: let's reschedule the meeting. The second answer was there were people in the room who were not cleared for this information. My response: identify who they were and ask them to leave. The third answer was that only the gang of twelve in the House and Senate were cleared for this information. My response: I was in the gang of twelve and never received the briefing. I was then told by Mr. Slocombe that he would get back to me with the correct answer.

When he gave me his fourth answer - only the Congressional leadership is briefed - my response was that I did not think that was true because I knew the leadership in the Senate had not been briefed. Later, Mr. Slocombe provided me with a fifth answer: The Secretary of Defense decides who gets briefed. At our meeting last week you told me that Mr. Slocombe was wrong and that you do not make this decision. Your understanding was that only the Chairman and the ranking member of the Armed Services Committees are given access to the targeting plan.

I regret to inform you that this does not appear the case since at least the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee has not been given the briefing. Thus, the sixth reason will now have to be replaced with a seventh.

Mr. Secretary, I can find no good reason for this policy. In my view this secrecy means less security. In my view we have several thousand more strategic nuclear weapons than we need for an effective deterrent against all current and potential adversaries. Rather than spending taxpayer dollars on nuclear weapons we do not need, we should be spending money on things we do need like readiness, conventional modernization, and nuclear modernization. In my view by insisting on keeping more nuclear weapons than we need to protect ourselves, we force the Russians to keep more than they can afford to maintain safely. The total Russian GDP is \$30 billion less than our defense budget. The causes of the Kursk tragedy should have sounded the alarm bell to warn us that Russian nuclear safety is in decline and that the threat of an accidental launch and proliferation is on the rise.

Whether or not my views are correct is of course debatable. However, it is not debatable that the responsibility for setting our defense policy rests with the elected, civilian representatives of the American people. But how can we provide the policy guidance that is needed when we are not given the information we need to decide if our current course of action is the correct one.

Therefore, Mr. Secretary, I respectfully urge you to change the policy so that all members of Congress can receive a briefing providing them with the details of our nuclear weapons targeting plan. I have no doubt that this change will result in a healthy debate that will increase our security in the post-Cold War era. If you cannot make such a change happen, I would respectfully ask you to provide me in writing the final and definitive answer to the following question: Do any Members of Congress have access to the detailed nuclear targeting plan?

In closing, Mr. Secretary, let me take this opportunity to thank you for the exceptional service you and Janet have given to our country.

Sincerely,

J. Robert Kerrey

Encl.